

The Life and Teachings of Ajahn Chah:

Remembrances of His Western Students

Over 200 people gathered in Portola Valley south of San Francisco to take part in an April 28 - 29 gathering honoring the life and teachings of Ajahn Chah. Seated onstage beneath an indoor forest, many of Ajahn Chah's earliest Western students - both monastic and lay - told stories of their days with this beloved teacher. The weekend also included three films, a display of photographs, periods of meditation practice, and shared luncheons on the lawn. The event was co-sponsored by Abhayagiri Monastery and the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies. Following are short excerpts from various speakers and photos from the conference.

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Ajahn Sumedho: What was so special about Ajahn Chah? There were many monks who were strict and learned. There were other popular teachers, several of whom were acknowledged masters. What drew me to Ajahn Chah was that he was relaxed, at ease and completely himself.

When I first went to live with Ajahn Chah, I couldn't speak Thai all that well. Most of my learning came through observing the example he set. He seemed so confident yet relaxed. There was a strictness to the monastery, but it was not at all oppressive. Ajahn Chah saw from the beginning that I was a very serious and goal-oriented person. I tried to control everything. Even though my intentions were good, I can now see that I was grasping and trying too hard. The whole manner of Ajahn Chah helped a person to relax. He had a great sense of humor. You felt at ease being in the lightness of his presence and in his direct way of speaking.

When I was a new abbot, I didn't know how to be an abbot, so I tried to do things the way I thought Ajahn Chah would do them. I played at being Ajahn Chah, and it came out false. People knew it was a phony act. When I reflected on how at ease Ajahn Chah was with himself, I had a sense of how to proceed. What I needed to do was to be comfortable with who I was - to learn to trust and relax. I didn't have to copy Ajahn Chah or the other great monks. My task was to develop within the confines of my own character and not make my character into a problem. I trusted in that. It resonated as true. In my life as a monk, I haven't always lived up to other people's expectations. I've learned to not always try to please others or live up to expectations and ideals.

Gail Kappel: I was blessed to accompany Ajahn Chah on his trip to Mt. Rainier with my brother, Joseph (the former Ajahn Pabhakaro). When Ajahn Chah saw joggers running along he asked, "Where are they running to?" When he saw snow, he called it the sawdust of water. It was my first experience with monastics. His presence was something new to me. It was so lovely.

On the day that he left Seattle, we offered the meal. After chanting, Ajahn Chah asked forgiveness for whatever he might have said or done that may have been hurtful. I was shocked that he could have believed he would have offended anyone. He had such genuine humility. It touched me, and I cried. Then he said to me, "If you cry a little bit, it's good. If you cry a lot, you're a fool."

Joseph Kappel (formerly Ajahn Pabhakaro): My father was a physical person, a very humble man. Ajahn Chah was a male figure he could relate to and admire. From the first day they met, my father loved Ajahn Chah. On this particular day, dad was out there moving these stones around our cabin at Steven's Pass. He was a strong and healthy man, quite comfortable doing physically demanding projects. He enjoyed puttering. Ajahn Chah called him Por Nom. Por is a respectful way of speaking to people. It means father or mother, aunt or uncle. Nom means strong. "Por Nom - you are very strong," Ajahn Chah said, as my father sweated with the weight of the large stones he carried. "Now, you need to make your heart as strong as your body." My father listened and made a sound. It was something like a whimper, a humble whimper. Then he said, "Yes, you're right."

Ajahn Amaro: When people met Ajahn Chah, they often asked how he came to embody such all encompassing wisdom. They wondered if it may have arisen through extensive study of the scriptures. Ajahn Chah responded to these assumptions in his characteristically direct and earthy way. "If wisdom has arisen," said Luang Por, "it was because of my defilements." Ajahn Chah was filled with restlessness, anger, tremendous doubt and voluminous lust. The only hindrance with which he was not blessed in full measure was dullness. The other hindrances blazed so magnificently in his psyche that there was no room for sleepiness.

As a new monk, Ajahn Chah wanted to get a handle on his sexual desire. He decided, as a plan of action, not to look at any woman for the entire three - month rain's retreat. Whenever a female person entered the monastery,

he practiced restraint and looked down. At the end of the retreat, he thought he had done pretty well. To test whether he had been cured of his lust, he decided to deliberately look at the village women when they came to the monastery. Rather than having gone beyond lust, he found that he was a complete mess. As he related it, when his eyes rested on a woman, it was as if he had been struck by lightning - his lust was that overwhelming. Although he failed in this instance, he learned a valuable lesson: restraint is insufficient in overcoming defilements. One needs to develop understanding as well.

In 1979 in Barre, Massachusetts, during a question-and-answer session while on retreat, someone asked Ajahn Chah, "Is it necessarily a barrier to be in a sexual relationship? Can one not view sex in terms of it being the dance of the sacred marriage? Couldn't it be noble and mystical?" After Ajahn Chah had the question translated, he pondered for a moment and then started picking his nose in a very graphic and extended way. When everyone was rolling on the floor laughing and he was sure they definitely got the point, he pulled his finger out of his nose: "There's nothing more to it than that, except what the mind adds to it." Perhaps this story has been altered a bit in the telling, but it's still a good story.

Thanissara: When I first met Ajahn Chah, perhaps even more than his words, I felt so uplifted in his presence. He had enormous freedom and power. He seemed fearless. He didn't need to please anyone. He was joyful and light, present and complete. This is not something you meet every day. It was communicated on an almost subliminal level.

When you hear a Dharma talk from someone who has this quality of presence, it's a bit like you are a withered flower in the desert and someone finally gives you some water. I was drinking in his talk like that - very simple, very direct. I remember thinking all the way through his talk, this is so wonderful, so good. Then he said, "If you've been listening to this talk and thinking, 'This is really good or really bad,' then you haven't been listening properly." Then I thought, "This is really good. I like that!"

A fundamental aspect of his teaching was to establish one in right view - not holding to any particular view - but rather a direct ability to experience life as it is. I had an experience of this when I went to visit Ajahn Chah in Northeast Thailand. I had taken the overnight train from Bangkok and asked the taxi driver to take me to Ajahn Chah. He knew exactly where to go. I found him at a small monastery near the Mekong river. I gathered some offerings and went to bow and pay respects. He asked me about my practice. When I related my spiritual quest, he said that I was looking around everywhere but what I needed to do was to look in one place, my own heart.

As a woman, I couldn't have a lot of contact with Ajahn Chah, and I couldn't be sent to study with Ajahn Sumedho either. Instead, Ajahn Chah suggested I practice with the American nun, Kum Fah. Kum Fah was very inspiring to me. When I left Thailand, I decided to ordain as a nun in England at Chithurst. After a time, Ajahn Sumedho organized a group from England to return to Thailand. One of the things we were looking forward to was reconnecting with this very inspiring nun. To our surprise, we found that Kum Fah had become a rabid born-again Christian. It was very distressing to see that this person had become so different than before. Furthermore, she was very keen on putting down Ajahn Chah and converting us to her views. Ajahn Sumedho went to Ajahn Chah very upset about the way Kum Fah behaved. Ajahn Chah simply said to Ajahn Sumedho, "Well, maybe she's right."

Ajahn Sumedho (on Ajahn Chah's first trip to Britain): I had only seen Ajahn Chah in Thailand. Over there, he was quite famous. People would bow down and scurry around falling over themselves trying to please him. I had some trepidation at the start of our travels because I knew it was going to be different in England. I wondered how he would respond. What a wonderful relief when I saw that he was equally relaxed away from Thailand.

On this first trip to a non - Buddhist country, we flew on Thai International. On takeoff from Karachi, Pakistan - at that time, they didn't have direct flights - one of the tires on the landing gear exploded. The pilot told us to take emergency measures; there would have to be an emergency landing in Rome. I explained all this to Ajahn Chah. He had to take out his false teeth. Meanwhile, people were begging Ajahn Chah to save them. They were frightened. He seemed quite amused by the whole thing even though I think he fully expected the plane to crash. As it turned out, we had only a bumpy landing. When we left the plane, all the Thai people who had been begging for help didn't even notice us. They didn't say anything to us at all. They were looking at the beautiful hostesses instead. Ajahn Chah said, "When they are in trouble, they come to me. When they aren't, they like the pretty women."

When we got off the plane, we had to get on a rail car. There were only women standing near the door, and we were the last ones to get on. In Thailand, we have very strict rules. Monks are not supposed to stand next to women or let them touch you. I watched Ajahn Chah as he kind of looked around and observed the scene. I saw that he just made up his mind and walked in. Even though he had only known Thai social etiquette, he was able to adapt to the the irregularities of a foreign country.

(On patience) Ajahn Chah would give very long talks at the monastery, about three hours. The monks had to sit in a particular way, a way that was painful to me. We couldn't move. I was in pain after sitting about five minutes. When I moved, the Thai monks corrected me. I felt I couldn't do anything right. I didn't understand the language all that well, and they seemed to be laughing at me. This would bring up such anger and rage. Ajahn Chah spoke in a Laotian dialect. After a while, I didn't even try to understand what he said. I learned to turn off

to the sound. In my life, I had always been a reasonable person. Since I couldn't understand the talks, I asked him if I could leave the sala (meditation hall) at that time. I wanted to go back to my kuti and accomplish something by practicing meditation. He said no. I felt he was being unreasonable. However, I still did what he told me. He said that my practice was patience, and I agreed with him. This is how I developed patience.

Everyone else seemed to be enjoying the talks so much, and I felt hatred towards all of them without exception. I would say to myself, "I'm going to leave. I've had enough." I remember one specific time when I was so angry. Ajahn Chah had been going on talking for ages. Then all of a sudden, he stopped and looked at me and asked how I was doing. There was so much love in the way he said it. The anger that had been brewing for hours dissipated in a very short time. You would think that if there's that much anger, it's going to take a long time to dissipate. But I saw just how fleeting the feeling really was. When you are willing to endure pain and emotional anguish - just let it patiently be - you can experience the cessation of the mood. This is a very peaceful and blissful state. I had known this in theory from studying the teaching. However, the actual experience was another matter.

Ajahn Chah constantly put me in situations that were difficult, situations that I didn't want. I wanted to live life on my own terms. I wanted to be a hermit. I didn't want to put up with the behavior of others. Many times I wanted to run away. A voice in me would say, "I've had enough of this. I'll get even with Ajahn Chah by leaving." I was sure that I would break his heart. Instead of leaving I learned patience. I learned to let go of my own opinions and desires. I learned to be with things the way they are.

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Source : Buddhasasana <http://www.budsas.org/>

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